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JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS.

BY

GEORGE PELLEW

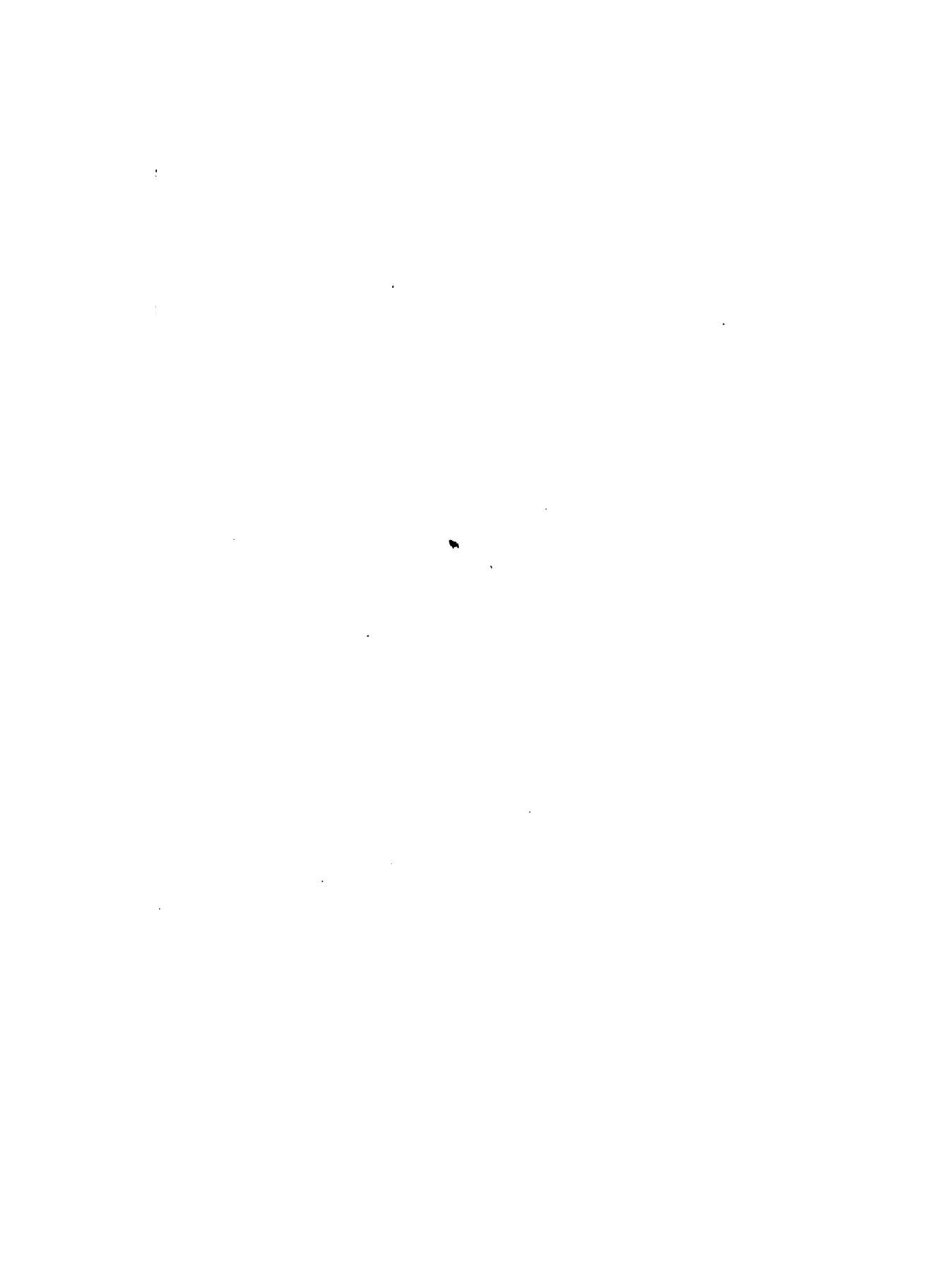
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JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS.

BY

GEORGE PELLEW.

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TO

THOMAS SERGEANT PERRY

This Essay is Dedicated

BY A STUDENT OF HIS

"ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY."



12

4

Towards the end of that century the reaction against cold reason reached its height. Then the imagination of poets was stimulated by ghosts and graves, and readers asked only to be charmed into delicious melancholy by the plaintive notes of a lute, or to be thrilled to "pleasant horror" by a "creaking hinge in an old castle." "A novel now," said George Colman, in his "Will,"

"Is nothing more
Than an old castle and a creaking door,
A distant hovel,
Clanking of chains, a gallery, a light,
Old armor, and a phantom all in white —
And there's a novel."

People were then more impressionable than they are now, and tears flowed easily. In Miss Austen's time, however, there was springing up a feeling of dissatisfaction with the romantic writing. When novels abounded, similar in tone to "The Monk," which, we are told, mothers had to keep locked up from their daughters, it was natural that earnest women like Mrs. Barbauld and Miss Edgeworth should take alarm. Miss Edgeworth in 1801 entitled "Belinda" a moral tale, "not wishing to acknowledge a novel," since "so much folly,

error, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination." And in Miss Berry's journals, and the memoirs of Mrs. Barbauld and Mrs. Opie, we may see how strong an undercurrent there was of antipathy to the popular literature, and that Jane Austen was not alone in discovering its absurdity.

What made most women of that generation quake with fascinated terror, only excited her mirth. When a mere girl, she wrote little stories, for she was a born story-teller; but "instead of presenting faithful copies of nature," says her biographer, "these tales were generally burlesques, ridiculing the improbable events and exaggerated sentiments which she had met with in sundry silly romances."

One of these early tales was, as I have said, the original of "Sense and Sensibility;" and part of another, probably, re-appears in Henry Tilney's imaginary account of the mysteries of Northanger Abbey, with which he frightens timid Catherine Moreland. Marianne Dashwood in "Sense and Sensibility" is obviously intended to represent the popular heroine of the more sentimental romances. "Sensibility," which, as Mr. Saintsbury has pointed out, originated in France, was one characteristic of the romantic reaction against the eighteenth

century's love of reasonableness, other signs of which we find in a revived interest in the miraculous, and in a new feeling of the picturesque in scenery and in history. This "sensibility" consisted in a certain conventional susceptibility to love at first sight, an excessive and rather melodramatic abandonment to emotion and tears, and a somewhat sophisticated fondness for dwelling on the details of one's sensations. The development of this fashion has been traced from Madame de la Fayette's "*La Princesse de Clèves*" to the "*Adolphe*" of Benjamin Constant. But, whether Miss Austen was acquainted with the romances of Marivaux and of Madame Riccoboni or not, the more immediate predecessor of Marianne was, doubtless, Amanda Fitzalan, in the "*Children of the Abbey*," which was published only a year before "*Sense and Sensibility*" was written. In Mrs. Roche's estimation the most important thing for a man or woman to possess is a "heart of sensibility," and she has given one to Lord Mortimer as well as to Amanda. The heroine, from the time she first sees and immediately falls in love with the perfectly accomplished hero, to the end of the three volumes, is in a perpetual state of tumultuous or tearful excitement. An exag-

gerated notion of the importance of the first impressions of love is also found in most of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels,—in the “Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne” and in the “Romance of the Forest;” and Miss Austen was scarcely guilty of caricature in making Marianne deny the possibility of the existence of second attachments. The scarcely perceptible flavor of conventionality that characterizes true “sensibility” may be discerned in this bit of description of Marianne's feelings: she “would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting with Willoughby.” We may believe that Miss Austen's “bright hazel eyes” twinkled mischievously enough when she made this fanciful girl “overcome an affection formed as late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another . . . whom, two years before, she had considered too old to be married, and who still sought the constitutional safeguard of a flannel waistcoat!”

Intense and sudden friendships were one effect of “sensibility,” a phase of it that existed in England from the time of the “Matchless Orinda,” who exchanged souls in verse succes-

sively with *Lucasia*, *Ardelia*, and *Antenor*, and that lasted long enough for Miss Edgeworth to ridicule it in "*L'Amie Inconnue*." Of this kind is Catherine Moreland's brief but demonstrative intimacy with Isabella Tilney, in "*Northanger Abbey*;" though of the two, Isabella is, perhaps, the more "sensible," as she is the less ingenuous.

Fanny Price has been mentioned as another instance of "sensibility;" but it seems to me that Miss Austen merely endeavored to represent her as a most affectionate woman. She strikes one sometimes as a trifle affected; but this was not, I think, the author's intention; and Fanny Price's tender emotion for her brother is very unlike the effusions of Mary Douglas, in Miss Ferrier's "*Marriage*," that are really illustrative of this extravagance.

A writer in the "*Lady's Magazine*" for July, 1789, speaks distinctly of the growth of sentimentality about that period. "In my time," he says, "we had no such thing among us as sentiment and sentimental, for common sense then was considered as, 'though no science, fairly worth the seven.' But I find now that sentiment prevails so universally in all our thoughts, words, and actions, that a new kind of character is sprung up,—that of men and women of sen-

timent." And he goes on to derive this sentimentality from the popular novels, and mentions one effect of it,—the giving of sentimental names to children, such as Matilda, Arabella, Rosalind, Valentine, and Eustace. One cannot help thinking that Miss Austen more or less consciously chose the more ordinary names for her own heroes and heroines,—Anne, Elizabeth, Emma, Jane, Henry, William, Frank, Edward, and Edmund.

With the romantic love of scenery Miss Austen sympathized as little as she did with romantic sensibility. Moonbeams and sunsets, together with Gothic towers, formed the chief properties of the novelists of the school of Horace Walpole; and Mrs. Radcliffe was famous for her imaginary Alpine scenes. Miss Austen's voice, I think, may be distinctly heard in this speech of Edward Ferrars: "I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight, and flourishing. I do not like ruined, tattered cottages. I am not fond of nettles, or thistles, or heath-blossoms." (Ossian was always speaking of "the thistle's beard whistling in the wind;" and Ossian was a favorite poet of Mrs. Roche and Mrs. Radcliffe.) "I have more pleasure in

a snug farmhouse than a watch-tower—and a troop of tidy, happy villagers please me better than the finest banditti in the world." Such sentiments as these connect Miss Austen with the writers of the eighteenth century, when nothing was thought beautiful that was not adapted to civilization, and mountains were deemed "monstrous excrescences" because they were barren. In "Pride and Prejudice" (1797) Elizabeth Bennet notices the beauty of the Derbyshire hills as little as Sir Charles Grandison noticed the grandeur of the Alps in 1753. Miss Austen never shows herself more moved by the charm of scenery than in her short, precise, but unpoetical descriptions of Darcy's park at Pemberley, in "Pride and Prejudice," and of the Rushworth's place at Sotherton, in "Mansfield Park." And the only girl in all these novels who gazes out of window on a moonlit night, murmurs these somewhat conventional reflections: "Here's harmony! Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe! Here's what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture!" Love of the picturesque was, perhaps, so closely associated in Miss Austen's mind with romantic exaggeration in every thing

else, that it seemed to her somewhat affected by the same quality, and it should be remembered that it was not till after she had begun to write (in 1798), that the "Lyrical Ballads" made the love of nature popular, which Wordsworth himself had treated as conventionally as earlier writers, only a few years before, in some passages of his "Descriptive Sketches" and "An Evening Walk."

In "Northanger Abbey," which was finished in 1798, though not published till 1818, Miss Austen directs her ridicule more particularly against the awe-inspiring romances, of which the "Mysteries of Udolpho" is a standard example. Catherine Moreland, a young girl who "falls miserably short of the true heroic height," early in the story sets out to spend two weeks with some friends at Bath. "Cautions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farmhouse must at such a moment relieve the fulness" of a mother's heart; but unsuspecting Mrs. Moreland contents herself with warning Catherine against catching cold, and with giving her an account-book. From a most realistic conversation between Catherine and her bosom-friend Miss Tilney, in the pump-room at Bath, a passage may be quoted about

the girl's admiration for Mrs. Radcliffe. "Have you gone on with 'Udolpho'?" — "Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil." — "Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?" — "Oh! yes, quite: what can it be? But do not tell me: I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton: I am sure it is Laurentina's skeleton. Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my life in reading it, I assure you; if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world." — "Dear creature! how much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished Udolpho, we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you." — "Have you, indeed! How glad I am! What are they all?" — "I will read you their names directly: here they are in my pocket-book. Castle of Wolfenback, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. Those will last us some time." — "Yes; pretty well; but are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?"

One may remember that Scythrop, in "Nightmare Abbey," "slept with horrid mysteries under his pillow, and dreamed of venerable eleutherarchs and ghastly confederates holding midnight conventions in subterranean caves." Peacock's novel, however, was directed against a school later than Mrs. Radcliffe, the school of Maturin and the German romantic drama, which was denounced by Coleridge, as well as by the "Anti-Jacobin."

Soon after this conversation, Catherine Moreland goes to pay a visit at the Tilneys' place, Northanger Abbey. On the way, Henry Tilney playfully tries to frighten her with an account of her possible adventures in the abbey. Over the fireplace in her room, he says, will be "the portrait of some handsome warrior, whose features will so incomprehensibly strike you, that you will not be able to withdraw your eyes from it." Such was the picture of Alphonso in the "Castle of Otranto;" and the reference to Mrs. Radcliffe is not a parody, only because no parody is possible when he continues, "You listen to the sound of her [the maid's] receding footsteps as long as the last echo can reach you; and when, with fainting spirits, you attempt to fasten your door, you discover, with increased alarm, that it has no lock." We may remem-

ber that Emily's door had no lock at Udolpho. When, in fact, Catherine does reach the abbey and her room, she is alarmed by the sight of an old chest in a deep recess. Trembling with anxious curiosity, she throws back the lid, that she fears may be secured by supernatural means (as spiritual forces fastened the doors of the haunted apartments in the "Old English Baron"), and finds "a white cotton counterpane, properly folded, reposing at one end of the chest in undisturbed possession." As she is going to bed, a high cabinet attracts her attention. After various vain and terrifying attempts, she courageously opens it, and, having searched drawer after drawer, discovers a manuscript, that she seizes "with an unsteady hand." In snuffing the candle, she unfortunately extinguished it. "A violent gust of wind, rising with sudden fury, added fresh horror to the moment. Catherine trembled from head to foot. In the pause that succeeded, a sound like receding footsteps and the closing of a distant door struck on her affrighted ear. Human nature could stand no more;" and she buried herself beneath the bedclothes, and did not fall asleep till morning. On awaking, she glanced at the precious document, and found it to be a washing-bill. This scene

reminds one of Adeline's discovery of an old and almost illegible manuscript in the "Romance of the Forest," of which she had time to read, as she sat by her bedside, only a few lines of terrible import, when her "light was expired in the socket ; and the paleness of the ink, so feebly shone upon, baffled her efforts to discriminate the letters," and compelled her "to suspend the inquiry which so many attendant circumstances had rendered awfully interesting." The half-obliterated lines were, of course, the last words of some unfortunate person who had been imprisoned in those very apartments, and reserved for a mysterious death.

In a separate wing of the house, Catherine learned, were Mrs. Tilney's apartments, that remained in the same condition in which they were at the time of her death. No reader of the romances could fail to scent a mystery here; for in the "Old English Baron," "Udolpho," "The Children of the Abbey," "The Romance of the Forest," and "A Sicilian Romance," we have a similar suite of rooms separated from the rest of the house, that was once the prison of some unfortunate relation of the lord of the place, and is now haunted by his ghost. Mrs. Tilney's end, Catherine very naturally assumed, had doubtless been hastened by her husband,

for she had died after a short illness, and Mr. Tilney was fond of long and solitary walks. It is not necessary to tell in this paper how the excited and timid girl explored the mysterious apartments, how she was laughed at by Henry Tilney, whose rooms they then were, and how ashamed she became of her nonsensical suspicions of his father, and grew finally into a sensible woman, we may hope, as Henry Tilney's wife.

It is, perhaps, due to Miss Austen's distaste for the exaggerated love-making in the romantic novels, and not merely to her own unemotional nature, that in all her works prudence rather than sentiment is approved of in marriage. In "Pride and Prejudice," Charlotte's married life with Mr. Collins, though without any love whatever, is represented as turning out not unhappily. Marriage, Miss Austen probably felt to be, what, in those days when few paths of general usefulness were open to women, it undoubtedly was, "the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and, however uncertain of giving happiness, . . . their pleasantest preservative from want." That marriage was thus regarded by society at that time may be readily acknowledged, though such unromantic views

were less common than they were fifty years earlier, when Mary Granville married with little hesitation a Mr. Pendarves whom she hated; and the conduct of her parents showed "the complete disregard shown in marriage at that period to any thing but the worldly settlement in life."¹ Such marriages were recommended by Mrs. Sheridan, in "The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph," and later still by Miss Edgeworth, "in Belinda;" and the world waited for Charlotte Brontë to declare that conventionality is not morality. We need not, then, be surprised, that, in "Sense and Sensibility," Marianne, with the author's fullest approbation, marries Colonel Brandon, "with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friend-ship." In "Persuasion," Miss Austen shows, that with increasing years she has grown more romantic; and gentle Anne Elliot very tenderly nourishes till middle life a delicate attachment that is rewarded with a passionate return. But in "Northanger Abbey" the loves of the hero and heroine are differently adjusted. "I must confess," Miss Austen says, "that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude; or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of

¹ Autobiography of Mrs. Delany, Boston, 1879.

giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of a heroine's dignity; but, if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own." We may see, perhaps, in this concluding sentence, how antipathy to romance led to realism.

After writing "*Northanger Abbey*," Miss Austen ceased to laugh at romanticism; but the reaction from it that her early works show by their light ridicule was not unimportant. The little tales she wrote in her early girlhood were not "copies of nature," but merely caricatures of the romances; and the question arises, how it was that Miss Austen came finally to give us such accurate pictures of life as "*Emma*" and "*Persuasion*." The answer may be found, I think, partly in the natural tendency towards realism of a reaction against romanticism, but chiefly in the influence of Richardson. When Miss Austen wrote, a state of things had come about in many respects parallel to that in Richardson's time. The old romances that Horace Walpole adapted to a more polished condition of society were not, it is true, those that were popular in the time immediately preceding Richardson, but belonged to a more remote period,

when men still believed in supernatural appearances. Yet certain elements were alike in these two kinds of romance,—ideal personification of vice and virtue, romantic love and gallantry, and an absence of real connection with the ordinary life of the day. The success of the romantic revival that was led by Walpole and his followers—Miss Clara Reeve, Mrs. Anne Radcliffe, and in America by Brockden Brown—may have been aided, as Wolff suggests, by a revolt from the prosaic tediousness of Richardson. At any rate, fifty years after “Pamela” was published, the same battle had to be fought again, and the anti-romantic writers had the same aims,—to describe life without exaggeration, and to afford moral reading for the young. These aims were united in Richardson, but in the later period were each represented by different writers; and, while both Miss Austen and Miss Edgeworth opposed the extravagances of the romantic school, the first was contented to be true to life, and the second, to be edifying.

In her avoidance of the romantic novel, Miss Austen, instead of trying to invent a new species of composition, simply adopted, as all writers must, the most suitable literary form that she was familiar with. Richardson had succeeded in making unromantic life interesting to an earlier

age, and it was his family novel that Miss Austen, perhaps instinctively, took for her model. "Her knowledge of Richardson's works," says Mr. Austen Leigh, "was such as no one is likely again to acquire. . . . Every circumstance narrated in 'Sir Charles Grandison,' all that was ever said or done in the cedar parlor, was familiar to her; and the wedding-days of Lady L. and Lady G. were as well remembered as if they had been living friends." It may well be that Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet would have been less lively and natural if Miss Biron had not been so untiring a narrator of all that she had heard during the day in that "cedar parlor." This much, at least, is certain, that the power of accurate representation develops as slowly in literature as in sculpture or in painting. Generation after generation of artists must exert their skill in more or less inaccurate portraiture, before the human body can be delineated in its true proportions; and the perfection of Miss Austen's sketches of character shows that the family novel had had a long and not inglorious history. Richardson himself did not originate this kind of fiction. But an essay like the present is not the place for an inquiry into its sources. Richardson, in being one of the first to make a great advance in the art of novel-

writing, could no more escape some of the faults of the romancers, than 'Lillo in "George Barnwell" could avoid the conventional phraseology of the heroic plays. But the perfect hero, who was merely a romantic survival in Richardson, was easily discarded by his successors, and reappeared in Holcroft's "Anna St. Ives," only to embody a philosophical doctrine. If Miss Austen had written fifty years earlier, she would probably have represented Mr. Darcy with only a proper degree of pride, and Willoughby as selfish and abandoned beyond the possibility of repentance. In other respects, too, Richardson showed the influence of his unrealistic predecessors. From many authorities (from Lady Montagu, Madame De Genlis, and Mrs. Hawkins) we learn that "the manners with which Richardson endows his personages were no more those of the time when he wrote than they are of our own time." Realism began with making heroes and heroines talk of trifles, and with describing actions that romantic writers disdained as commonplace and undignified; and Miss Austen was one of the first to unite with naturalness of incident the higher quality of truth in general effect.

The fondness with which Richardson lingered over the infinitesimal details of house-

hold life is also characteristic of Miss Austen. Observation of practical minutiae is naturally a quality of women rather than of men ; and the authors in whom it is especially conspicuous, Richardson and Cowper, were remarkable for the sympathy they excited in little groups of feminine admirers. Both delighted in the easy chatter that arises when the shutters are closed around "the bubbling and loud-hissing urn," and of both authors was Miss Austen an assiduous reader. It is not unnatural, that, with such models before her, a woman with her simple domestic tastes, practical feminine sense, and quick perception, should have shown a similar circumstantial precision in describing the daily doings of the Musgroves at Overcross Cottage, in "Persuasion," and of the Woodhouses at Hartfield, in "Emma." But, if Sir Charles Grandison and Miss Biron had had no relations, we may doubt whether it would have been the delight of Miss Austen's life, as she said it was, to collect "three or four families in a country village."

In 1778 "Evelina" appeared, and was followed in 1782 by "Cecilia." To Miss Burney, it was said, we owe "not only 'Evelina,' 'Cecilia,' and 'Camilla,' but also Miss Austen's 'Mansfield Park,' and Miss Edgeworth's 'Ab-

sentee.'" This statement, which is quoted by Mr. Murch in "Mrs. Barbauld and her Contemporaries," wherever it originated, seems to me unprecise. Miss Burney's manner reminds one rather of Fielding and Smollett than of Richardson. Indeed, one may conjecture that "Evelina" was inspired by a reaction against "Clarissa Harlowe" and "Harriet Biron," and such models of excellence, if this is not too fanciful an interpretation to put upon the following sentence in the preface: "The heroine of these memoirs, young, artless, and inexperienced, is 'no faultless monster that the world ne'er saw,' but the offspring of Nature, and of Nature in her simplest attire." Miss Burney's sketches of low life are almost caricatures, and with characters of very low life all her heroines are contrasted. Madame Duval, Capt. Mirvan, Mr. Smith, and all the members of the Brangton family, are unnaturally vulgar, without even variety in their vulgarity. Of snobbishness, indeed, Miss Burney had a vivid perception that has been equalled only by Thackeray. But many of her personages, like Mr. Lovel in "Evelina" and Capt. Aresby and Mr. Meadows in "Cecilia," are mere abstractions, and as unsubstantial as the personifications in an ode. Rudeness everywhere passes for wit, from the

practical joking of Capt. Mirvan to the not less impolite sarcasm of Mrs. Selwyn. Lord Orville is Richardsonian, and he is Sir Charles Grandison in miniature, as noble, brave, courteous, and as virtuous; and Sir Charles Willoughby is only a less wicked Sir Hugh Pollexfen. The element of attempted seduction again appears, and the letter form is strictly preserved. But these connections with Richardson are superficial. The plot is borrowed, according to Dunlop, from "Miss Betsy Thoughtless," a book that I have not had access to; but, to judge from "Evelina," it must have been more akin to the novel of adventure than to the family novel. The chief sign of this is the device of bringing the heroine into successive connection with many odd and dissimilar people. The interest depends more on the variety of the scenes than on the development of character.

Miss Austen, unlike Miss Burney, describes a person never as of one humor, but as a synthesis of many qualities. Mr. Collins, in "Pride and Prejudice," is not merely pompous: with self-importance he combines servility to his superiors, and, in spite of his silliness, we do not doubt that his duties were performed with sufficient propriety. How complete, again, are the characters of Mr. Elton and his wife in

“Emma”! Both are vulgar, but into how many elements is their vulgarity resolved! Miss Austen gives even Mrs. Norris a heart, and Mrs. Bennet good nature. Miss Burney sketches rough outlines, while Miss Austen paints with as delicate shading as on an ivory tablet. This discriminating touch was taught by Richardson, who was naturally led to it by the form he adopted of a family correspondence. When several people write about the same person, he must be described by each from a somewhat different point of view. In this way a character is thrown into greater relief, and is rounded into the many-sided being whom we recognize as human.

Towards the end of the last century, more general interest began to be taken in education. Rousseau's *influence* had extended to England, and Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Mr. Day, the author of “Sandford and Merton,” were among the first expounders of his theories. One result of this movement was Maria Edgeworth's “Moral Tales,” which were intended to make the draught of instruction palatable to the young. In the same year, 1801, Mrs. Opie, who soon became a great admirer of Miss Edgeworth, published “Father and Daughter,” of which she said, “Its highest pretensions are to be a simple moral tale.”

Hannah More's "Cœlebs," 1808, according to Mrs. Hawkins,¹ "seemed to form an epocha in moral fiction, . . . and nothing was for a time admissible into the boudoir or the school-room, but that which had a moral." We may notice that Mary Brunton, the author of "Discipline" and "Self-control," in a letter to a friend, gave, as a reason for not continuing to write, the extreme difficulty of finding a suitable moral. In due time the didactic tale reached America; and Miss Sedgwick wrote early enough in the century to receive the approbation of Miss Edgeworth and Mrs. Barbauld.

To some extent the work of these writers is realistic, since a direct moral aim necessitates a constant reference to experience. But, even in her more elaborated novels, Miss Edgeworth has a slightly pedagogic tone, as when, in "Belinda," a little girl asks, "What is this, mamma? it is not a guitar, is it?" and receives the answer, "No, my dear: it is called a banjore. It is an African instrument, of which the negroes are particularly fond." And she is perpetually calling our attention to the fact that this or that edifying incident is "taken from real life." It is plain that Miss Austen had no close connection with this method of writing; yet even she could

¹ *Memoirs*, vol. i. p. 200.

not altogether avoid sharing the feelings of her contemporaries.

In her early novels, in "Lady Susan," "The Watsons," and even in "Pride and Prejudice," no moral is obtrusive. "Sense and Sensibility" and "Northanger Abbey" opposed, as we have seen, the sentimentality and the ghastly horrors of the romances. But after completing "Pride and Prejudice," in 1798, Miss Austen ceased to write for some twelve or thirteen years, and it was during this period that most of Miss Edgeworth's more didactic works were published. Of "Belinda," Miss Austen expressed in "Northanger Abbey" the greatest admiration; and in a letter written about 1810 she confessed, "I have made up my mind to like no novels really, but Miss Edgeworth's, E.'s, and my own." It is natural to expect, that, when Miss Austen began to write again, she should be somewhat influenced by the new notion of an author's duty. Accordingly, in "Mansfield Park," published in 1814, the moral tone is almost too prominent, and the moral is one that was always dear to Miss Edgeworth,—the ill effect on character of an improper early education. The neglect and intermittent severity of Sir Thomas Bertram, and the unwise indulgence of their aunt, Mrs. Norris, have, indeed, a most melan-

choly influence on Maria and Julia Bertram. Conceited and selfish, they care only for novelty and pleasure ; and the end is, that Julia makes a runaway match; and Maria, after marrying a man whom she does not love, elopes with a man who does not love her. Wretchedly did Sir Thomas feel, “ that, with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper.” That Julia’s fate is less miserable than her sister’s is due, we are told, to “ her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered and spoiled.” Even Henry Crawford, who infatuated the wretched Maria, was “ ruined by early independence and bad domestic example.” To these ill-starred persons, Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram are foils ; but Miss Austen, in making them virtuous, has succeeded in making Fanny characterless, and Edmund, I am afraid, something of a prig.

This same tendency is noticeable in “ Emma” (1816). Many a young lady besides Emma has felt the weight of Mr. Knightley’s disapprobation. He represents in a modified form the wise parent, or the omnipresent tutor of the didactic school. It is Mr. Knightley who urges

Emma to visit Miss Bates, and who takes every opportunity of rebuking her rashness of speech and her match-making proclivities. "Match-making" would have been as suitable a title for "Emma," as "Manceuvring" was for Miss Edgeworth's novel of that name. We get from it a vivid impression of the injury done by raising a young girl's hopes above her station, and of the foolish vanity of the heroine, who, while believing she is wise enough to understand and direct the hearts of others, only finds out that she has grievously misinterpreted her own. That is a fine chapter in which Harriet confides to Emma that it is Mr. Knightley whom she has been unintentionally taught to love; and one can sympathize with the miserable Emma as she spends the long night in gloomy meditation. But her intentions had always been unselfish, and the momentary irony of her fate soon changes to benevolence: Harriet marries the despised Mr. Martin, and Emma is won by the somewhat censorious Knightley of her choice.

This is, of course, a most incomplete description of such novels as "Mansfield Park" and "Emma," which are far from being merely moral tales. But here I wish only to indicate that there appears in them a didactic purpose far more obviously than in Miss Austen's other

works, and that this quality in them was probably due to the influence of a wide-spread tendency of the time. In "Persuasion," her last novel, Miss Austen is no longer didactic. It is, to my taste, the most mellow and charming of all the novels; and, in place of the rather unsympathetic wit of "Pride and Prejudice," there appears, almost for the first time in Miss Austen, an element of pathos.

What writers in those days tried to inculcate differed very considerably from the ethical teaching of the great novelists of our time. To Mrs. Opie, Miss Edgeworth, and even to Miss Austen, it seemed worth while to show what misery follows indiscreet indulgence or lack of discipline in childhood, the practical harm that can be caused by slight deviations from truth, the folly of match-making, or the excesses of unrestrained sentimentality. Errors as petty as these we now care to see represented in a comedy, perhaps, but not in a novel. We are interested by the subtler and more elemental conflicts of the soul, by the eternal variance between the ideals of youth and the realities of life, the "pathos of a lot where every thing is below the level of tragedy, except the passionate egoism of the sufferer," the reaction of an independent and strong personality against

social conventions, the pathetic but inevitable divergence of the young generation from the old, or the endeavor of a noble nature to satisfy its sense of right amid contradictory conceptions of duty. But at that time the considerations of a somewhat elementary though conventional civilization were still predominant. The more superficial aspects of society were then carefully observed, while its profounder secrets were as yet unexplored. In the task of civilizing the world, to which the eighteenth century applied itself, the qualities most strenuously insisted on were those that centred about order and comfort, obedience, politeness, common sense, and a spirit of independence not too uncompromising. The general ideals of that day were lower than the ideals of the present. There was a less intense striving for the higher life. There was less doubt as to what was right, and therefore less anxiety to find it. The only voice heard by that country society that Miss Austen knew was the voice of the Church of England before it had caught from the Wesleyans the spirit of personal devotion, and long before romanticism in the Oxford movement had inspired it with fresh enthusiasm. The first impulse to more earnest piety within the Establishment was given by Wilberforce's

“Practical View,” in 1797; but the awakening from religious lethargy was not sudden.

Clergymen then had comfortable notions of their duties. Servility to patrons was required of them, instead of visiting the poor. “The next generation,” wrote Southey, in 1818, “I trust, will see fewer of these marrying and christening machines.” In Miss Austen’s Mr. Collins, Dr. Grant, and Mr. Elton, we find varieties of the same self-indulgent, self-satisfied class that Peacock was so fond of satirizing in his novels. But not even such kind-hearted and good men as Edward Bertram, Edward Ferrars, or Henry Tilney, regard the church as a spiritual vocation with peculiar responsibilities. They are, indeed, more circumspect in behavior than the earlier generation of clergymen whom Cowper ridiculed :

“A cassocked huntsman and a fiddling priest.”

But none of them seem to have had moments of the painful introspection, the intense longing and listening “to discern the voice amid the voices,” that is characteristic of a Robertson or a Stopford Brooke to-day. They are courteous lovers, and have all the domestic virtues; but their benevolence is not active; their eyes are undazzled by any vision; and

only a greater sobriety of demeanor, that tends to become priggishness, distinguishes them from their fellow-men.

At that time the aristocratic spirit of earlier ages still prevailed in England, and was fostered throughout the early years of the present century by a fear of French principles, and a hatred of Napoleon, that for a while insulated the country from Continental influences. The classes of society were distinctly separated, and the lower classes had not yet learned to make their voices heard. Miss Austen's experience was limited to an acquaintance with the country gentry; and in her novels we meet only members of this class and their immediate dependents. Even her most vulgar characters have some claims to gentility. Mrs. Jennings is the mother of Lady Middleton; the Misses Steele have most respectable connections; Mrs. Clay is the daughter of a solicitor; and Mrs. Smith and Miss Bates, though treated somewhat as inferiors, are ladies in reduced circumstances. Mr. Martin, the young farmer in "Emma," is discreetly kept at a distance, and is only occasionally referred to. These genteel people still live in Miss Austen's pages; but how limited is their life! how barren of incident! how undignified by deep emotion! We move from

Mansfield Park to Hartfield, from Hartfield to Kellynch Hall, and find the same perpetual round of gossiping and visiting, of party-giving and match-making. Emma and Mr. Knightley may talk seriously enough, but of nothing of more general interest than Emma's rudeness, or Frank Churchill's attentions. In Miss Austen's novels we do not hear "the distant chorus of humanity," which, as Doudan said, must accompany every great work. No cry of distressed laborers, no rumor of political changes, disturbs the pre-occupation of this society with itself.

It is only very gradually that our mental horizon has widened, and with it the range of our sympathy. We have now learned to feel

"The solidarity of life,
And unity of individual soul."

But our sense of the brotherhood of man is as recent an acquisition as our love of mountains. It required the French Revolution to fuse the intellectual conception of democracy with emotion.

The task of authors, since Miss Austen wrote, has been to illustrate the infinite pathos and beauty of common prosaic life, and to give utterance to the pains and joys that are too

universal to be obvious. And the last of the great novelists refers to a still further development of sympathy, when she says, "That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind. . . . If we had a keener vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow, and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

This widening and intensification of sympathy has been attended with an increased detestation of selfishness,—a vice that has only been stigmatized as such for some two centuries. The recognition of the interdependence of all men has introduced nobler ideals of self-sacrifice, has shown greater possibilities of heroism. As belief becomes less general, the beauty and importance of the unselfish virtues are more clearly seen, and, in a sort of self-defence, ethical teachers endeavor to make sympathy with humanity take the place of religion. The duty towards other people that is created by their contact with us, a duty that was felt so keenly by George Eliot, was but slightly impressed upon Jane Austen, if we may judge from the absence of such a feeling in any of her hero-

ines, except, perhaps, in Anne Elliot. A modern Emma might have passed many a sleepless night in trying to persuade herself that she ought to refuse Knightley for the sake of Harriet, whom she had involuntarily encouraged to love him ; and certainly a modern Fanny Price would have thought it her duty not to leave the slatternly household of her parents till she had completely reformed it, for all the attractions of Mansfield Park.

An intense and almost morbid desire to do right is characteristic of the higher types of women of the present day,—the Dorothea Brookes and Maggie Tullivers of real life. But of these delicate and anxious consciences Miss Austen knew nothing, and tells us nothing. Catherine, in "Northanger Abbey," is a mere girl, simple and natural. Jane Bennet is fragrant with unobtrusive goodness ; but her character is rather indicated than portrayed. In Elizabeth Bennet we meet a very definite and forcible individuality ; but she is like one whose deepest depths have not been sounded. Fanny Price and Anne Elliot resemble each other in an unhesitating obedience that greatly simplifies questions of conscience. As the tender companion of irritable Mrs. Musgrove, and the thoughtful, considerate nurse of Louisa, Anne

Elliot shows a spontaneous sympathy with others that Fanny Price was incapable of. But a woman as conscientious as Anne at the present day would have thought more of her lover's claims upon her, and would not have been persuaded to give him up without some perplexity as to her duty. Emma Woodhouse has the opposite qualities to those of Fanny Price. So far from being shy and quiet, she is self-confident and talkative, and withal as kindhearted and unselfish, though twice as spirited, as Anne Elliot. Emma Woodhouse and Lizzie Bennet were Miss Austen's favorite characters; perhaps their witty, active, independent natures reminded her of herself. Emma alone, of Miss Austen's heroines, seems to have aims of usefulness outside the limits of her family: in later times those aims would have been, perhaps, not wiser, but certainly more noble.

The women of Jane Austen are true to life: they resemble many of those whom we know, and love or hate, to-day; but the world in which they lived, and its interests, were too limited for their full development. In an atmosphere of greater moral or religious enthusiasm, with a broader and more stimulating education, with the more extended experience and knowledge of life that we have purchased with the loss of

so much peace of mind, Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot would have been types of character full of suggestiveness for us. It was the meagre possibilities of that time that filled Emma's mind with matrimonial plans for her friends, and not with Dorothea's designs of cottages for the poor; and in a more fervid age Anne's "slender form and pensive face" might have been thrilled with a mission as blessed as Miss Nightingale's. How inadequate an education was then thought sufficient for a woman may be gathered from Mary Wollstonecraft's indignant "vindication of the rights of women" [1776]. Then ignorance was confounded with innocence, and to be learned was a reproach. Music and drawing were the only necessary accomplishments; and the provincial opinion, even in Miss Austen's time, might probably be illustrated by the prejudices of the young men, who in "Sir Charles Grandison" were, against their will, led into argument with Harriet Biron. "When I was young," says Miss Martineau in her "Autobiography," "it was not thought proper for young ladies to study very conspicuously, and especially with pen in hand. Young ladies, at least in provincial towns, were expected to sit down in the parlor to sew,—during which reading aloud was permitted,—or to

practise their music, but so as to be fit to receive callers, without any signs of blue-stockingism which could be repeated abroad. Jane Austen herself, the queen of novelists, . . . was compelled by the feelings of her family to cover up her manuscripts with a large piece of muslin-work, kept on the table for the purpose, whenever any genteel people came in. So it was with other young ladies for some time after Jane Austen was in her grave; and thus my first studies in philosophy were carried on with great care and reserve." When such sentiments were general, it is not surprising that details of family life and family gossip formed the sole intellectual interest of Miss Austen's heroines.

It was a long time before a natural girl appeared in fiction. Richardson's heroines are like the faultless women in the romances; those of Fielding and Smollett are graced with all the charms of person, but their intellectual and moral life is left to the reader's imagination; and Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe never even attempted the painting of character. It was left for women to explain the emotions of women. Mrs. Sheridan, in "Sidney Bidulph," in 1761, was, perhaps, the first to show the world

what an intelligent English girl was like. Miss Burney described the girl in society ; but she was incapable of understanding her intellectual delicacy, which Charlotte Smith, the poet and novelist, in spite of her unnatural and romantic plots, succeeded in representing in such a character as Emmeline. It is in her Emma and Elizabeth Bennet that Miss Austen's genius is most distinctly shown. High-spirited, clever, frank, and true-hearted, they are very different from the susceptible maidens of Mrs. Radcliffe. But a heroine with the faults of temper and judgment that we detest in our friends had not yet become attractive ; and many people may have agreed with Miss Mitford in finding it an "entire want of taste which could produce so pert, so worldly, a heroine " as Elizabeth Bennet. It is the intellectual rather than the emotional side of the feminine character that is brought out by Miss Austen ; but to have done that well was an important contribution to English fiction.

Not only did Miss Austen confine herself to the delineation of the genteel society in which she lived, she even limited this description to the more domestic aspects of that society. Then, as in later days, some men must have been driven into dissipation by the monotony

of provincial life; and many a parsonage besides that little house at Haworth must have had its Branwell Brontë. But Miss Austen fastidiously averts her eyes from the greater vices of society. The virtue of her men and women is not very severely tested. She seems unaware of the truth that lies in the saying of a later novelist: "Temptation often assails the finest natures, as the pecking swallow or destructive wasp attacks the sweetest and mellowest fruit, eschewing what is sour and crude." It would be well for the world if most people had no graver faults to conquer than Darcy's pride, or Marianne's sensibility, Edmund Bertram's weak yielding to take part in a play, or Jane Fairfax's tendency to be secretive. It is true that Maria Rushworth and Lydia Bennet sin shamelessly and terribly. But Jane Austen does not attempt to represent the struggle between vice and virtue. In "Jane Eyre" and "The Mill on the Floss" we feel the tragic intensity of the moment of temptation; but Miss Austen tells us merely of the petty faults, the frivolities of flirtation, that might be detected by any quick-witted observer: we do not sit with Mrs. Rushworth in her dressing-room the night before the elopement; we do not know what tears she shed of repentance or regret in the unloved years she lived alone with Mrs. Norris.

Miss Austen's glance, keen as it was, did not penetrate far beneath the surface. Even in that comfortable and unanxious society there must have been some hatred intenser than Mrs. Bennet's dislike of Mr. Darcy, some love mightier than Henry Tilney's affection for Catherine Morley. The elemental forces of human nature were repressed indeed, but not eliminated, in the eighteenth century. There were great causes to which men dedicated their lives, there were great prizes to be won, in the days of Fox and Pitt and Wilberforce. But Miss Austen's little world was not large enough for ambition, and all the passions dwindled in that provincial atmosphere.

That Miss Austen omitted from her representations of life its tragedy goes far to justify Charlotte Brontë's criticism, that she is "more real than true." Perhaps she was aware of this defect in her work when she wrote of "Pride and Prejudice," "It is rather too light and bright and sparkling: it wants shade." She observed life, rather than felt it. Hers was not a complex individuality, and in her novels we do not see the different phases of one infinitely variable nature, but rather the reflection that life cast upon a singularly simple, calm, and humorous temperament. She seems al-

ways to preserve the same mood; and of that mood her lucid, plain, straightforward style is the natural expression. It is the perfection of the easy and refined prose that it was the endeavor of the writers of the last century to create. For the style alone these novels are worth studying at a time when men of any literary pretension imitate the affectations of Mr. Pater and of Mr. Swinburne, and more popular authors adopt the flippant and extravagant manner of modern journalists.

The qualities of Miss Austen that I have indicated,—her eighteenth century culture, her detachment from the romantic movement, her realism, when the more genuinely human elements of life were not observed, and her equitable temperament,—these show plainly enough that one thing, at least, which our age finds in life, Miss Austen could not have found,—that is, poetry. To Fanny Price, as she sat over that unexpected and most comfortable fire, we may be sure it never occurred, as it did to Dorothea Brooke, that “the red fire, with its gently audible movement,” was “like a solemn existence calmly independent of the petty passions, the imbecile desires, the straining after worthless uncertainties,” though such vain endeavors, perhaps, were “daily moving her

contempt." And from the calm lips of Miss Austen's lovers there never bursts such an impassioned cry as this from Rochester, in "*Jane Eyre*": "I longed for thee, Jane! Oh! I longed for thee both with soul and flesh. I asked of God, at once in anguish and humility, if I had not been long enough desolate, afflicted, tormented, and might not soon taste bliss and peace once more. That I merited all I endured, I acknowledged; that I could scarcely endure more, I pleaded; and the Alpha and Omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words, 'Jane, Jane, Jane!'"

To one as sensitive and tensely strung as Charlotte Brontë, Miss Austen, "without poetry, without sentiment," as she may be said to be in comparison with later writers, not unnaturally seemed to have fallen short of greatness. But one rare faculty she possessed, that redeems her work from insignificance,—the faculty of describing accurately what she saw. She anticipated the scientific precision that the spirit of the age is now demanding in literature and art. People are now beginning to be dissatisfied with artificiality and exaggeration. Walt Whitman expresses the reaction against conventionality in poetry; Zola, that against conventionality in novels and the drama; and,

though neither writer is able in his practice to avoid the excesses he condemns, we may believe that the art and fiction of the future will gradually be brought into ever closer relation to the facts of experience. The naturalness of Miss Austen's characters has always excited the wonder and admiration of her critics. I believe there is not a single impossible or extravagant character, however unimportant, in any of Miss Austen's greater novels. We find there an extraordinary variety of whimsical and empty-headed old ladies and old gentlemen, from Mrs. Allen, — who tries to console lonely Catherine Morley at the ball by vainly reiterating, "I wish you could dance, my dear ; I wish you could get a partner," — to Mr. Woodhouse, with his nervous but polite anxiety lest his guests may over-eat, and need the services the next day of the "invaluable" Perry. But no two of these good people are alike, and none of them are caricatures ; and the same statement is true of the numberless vulgar men and women that throng her pages. Miss Austen, perhaps, is apt to describe persons from the outside, instead of giving us an insight into their principles of action, their thoughts and feelings. She has not, perhaps, the power of projecting herself into a character, and

becoming that character for the time. But she has exquisite tact to divine how any character at any time should look and act. The natural ease and appropriateness of the conversations in these books has been often noticed, of which "the verbose, roundabout, and parenthetic" prosing of Miss Bates has become a trite example; and one no less excellent is the conversation between Isabella Tilney and Catherine Moreland, that has been already quoted.

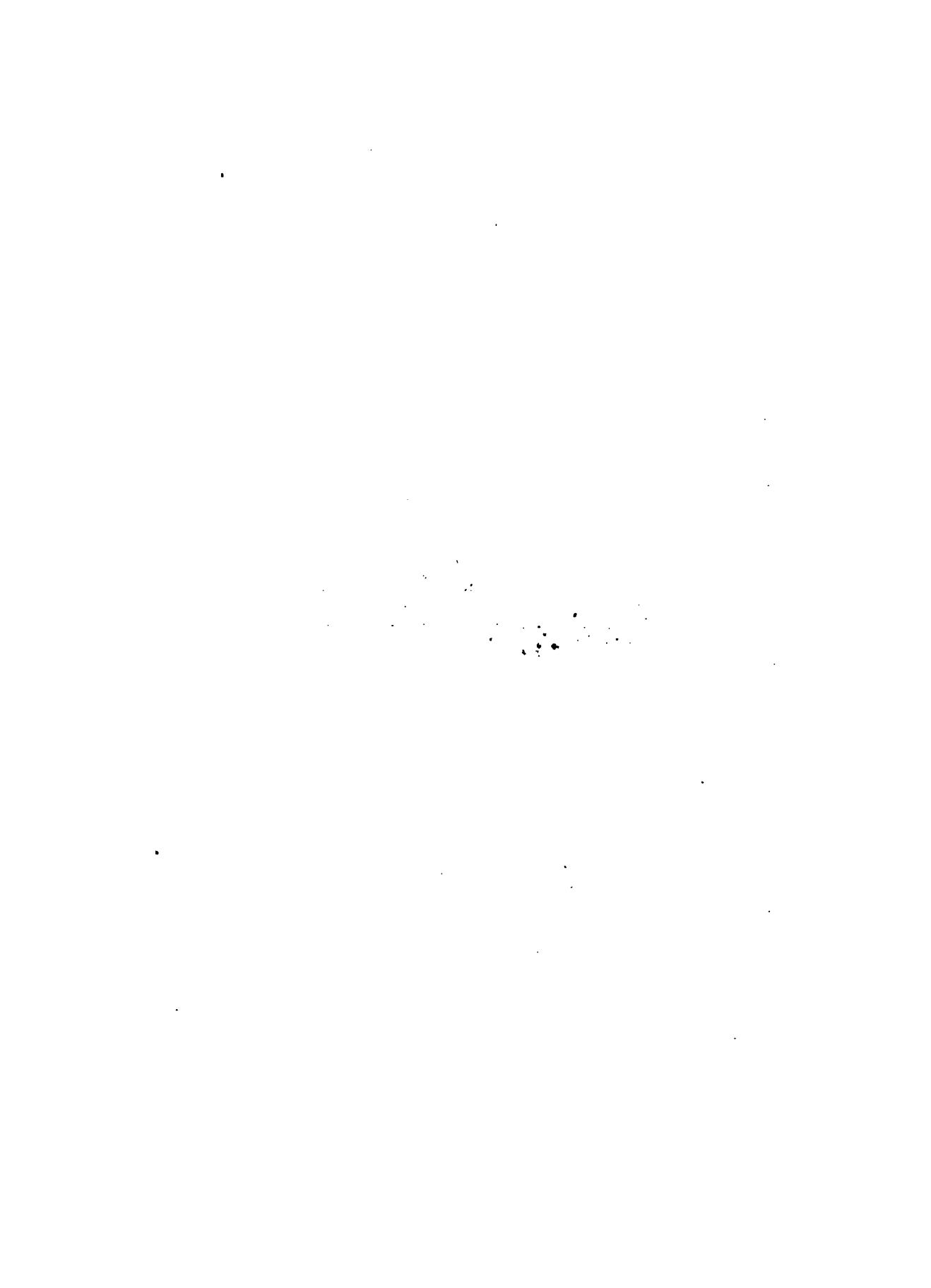
It is in her power of creating in artistic form another world, similar to the little world she knew, that Miss Austen's power consists. She was well aware of her own genius and its limitations, and declined Mr. Clarke's well-meant but absurd suggestions to describe a literary clergyman like Beattie's minstrel, or to write an historical romance founded on the house of Saxe-Coburg. She remained uninfluenced by the romantic sense of the picturesqueness of the past, as she was uninfluenced by the romantic love of picturesque nature; and she was contented to leave it to Anne Porter to prepare the way for Scott.

The life in those country-houses may have been tedious and commonplace; but in Miss Austen's pages it is always entertaining. As we open "Pride and Prejudice," or "Persuasion," we become conscious of the charm of

one of the wittiest and brightest women that ever lived ; and under the spell of her humor we do not feel the absence of poetry, we forget to ask for an answer to the riddles of our existence. George Eliot or Turgenev may raise us to a higher level of thought and emotion, and in the intellectual pride of Bazaroff, or in the moral perplexities of Dorothea, may arouse a deeper and more ennobling sympathy than Jane Austen ever wished to excite, or ever can. They are, indeed, great authors in a sense in which Jane Austen is not ; for they represent in typical characters the aspirations and intellectual life of a whole generation.

Jane Austen has no irresistible power to extort tears, or compel admiration ; but her novels give a real though unexciting pleasure. The petty inconsistencies and social vanities of human beings are as enduring as their more impressive qualities ; and it is of these that Miss Austen writes, and not, like Miss Burney, merely of the passing manners of the time. Life is often taken too seriously. Real griefs are so common, that it is grateful to turn to an author who does not make fictitious ones too pathetic. "I love things that make me gay," said Miss Mitford : "therefore, amongst other reasons, I love Miss Austen." And Miss Mitford is not the only reader who has felt this.

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